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ABSTRACT

In 1886, the New York "Tribune" ran a series of articles by Helen Campbell, "The Prisoners of Poverty," which investigated the sufferings of working women in New York's slums. Initially a fiction and housekeeping writer, Helen Campbell's home economics orientation first pointed her toward the problems of the poor. In the late 1870s, she wrote a series of nonfiction narratives that were brought together in a book entitled "The Problem of the Poor," which marked her beginnings as a journalist, social investigator and social critic. Shortly before the "Tribune" series, Campbell published a novel attempting to learn about and help the poor. It was in the "Tribune" series, however, that Campbell reached maturity as a writer who identified with and understood the women she described: victims of the low-paying fiercely competitive garment trade. Commentary by the "Tribune" reiterated that the series was to provoke social action and to point out the intense competition in the garment industry as the chief reason for its impoverished workers. Gradually, Campbell expanded her series to include the living conditions of the workers, women in the fields other than the garment trade, the complex causes of slum women's problems, and the difficulties in solving them. She began suggesting solutions--some from the "best" of socialism--that, while alienating the "Tribune," marked her development as a social reformer. (HTH)

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The "Unsavory Researches" of Helen Campbell: A 19th-Century Journalist's Investigation of Urban Women's Poverty

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"Only a Zola could describe deliberately what any eye may see [in the slums], any minute detail of which would excite an outburst of popular indignation. Yet I am by no means certain that such detail has not far more right to space than much that fills our morning papers, and that the plain, bald statement of facts, shorn of all flights of fancy . . . might not rouse the public to some sense of what lies below the surface of this fair-seeming civilization of today."

—Helen Campbell
New York Tribune, January 2, 1887

On October 17, 1886, the New York Tribune announced that the following week it would begin publishing a series of articles intended to "stimulate at once the public conscience and the public intelligence." Entitled "Prisoners of Poverty," the series would investigate "the sufferings and privations of working women" in New York's slums, detailing "the helpless indigence, the ceaseless toil, the unrelieved privation, which make up the lives of these unfortunates." The Tribune admitted that the problems of these women "are not generally recognized, certainly not generally borne in mind," but it warned that "chattel slavery never involved such unmitigated suffering as a large percentage of our working women endure."[1]

The author of the series, which would run for the next five months, was identified as the paper's "special commissioner," Helen Campbell. She was described as a writer who in previous work had "gone down among the poor and suffering" and "studied the most difficult of social problems deeply and at first hand." Campbell, the Tribune explained, "possesses peculiar aptitude and knowledge, as her writings before the public abundantly testify."[2]

Among those earlier writings was a series of magazine articles (appearing in book form in 1882) which described life in New York's slums.[3] They also included a novel, published in early 1886, Campbell in which a wealthy woman journeyed through the slums, learning of the terrible physical and emotional suffering endured by its inhabitants, especially women.[4] "This deeply interesting story," the Tribune said of the novel, "could only have been written by one who had studied the most difficult of social problems deeply and at first hand."[5]

In light of these two earlier works, the selection of Helen Campbell to investigate and report on poor working women probably was not surprising to Tribune readers. The surprise is left to the modern reader of journalism history who is unlikely to have encountered references to Campbell or to realize that the topic of working women's slum life was examined in great depth by a journalist some 100 years ago—and more than a decade before the beginnings of muckraking journalism.[6]

Yet many historians working in fields other than journalism have utilized Helen Campbell's pioneering work. Her writings have been of particular value to scholars studying the urban poor, especially women and children, in late 19th-Century America.[7] Although many of Campbell's books are now out of print, a number have been reissued and serve as readily accessible sources for tracing important aspects of this country's social and economic history.[8] Journalism historians, though, have not yet examined either Campbell's work or the circumstances which led her to produce it.

This paper is a first effort at examining Campbell and her early journalism within the context of journalism history. It describes and analyzes the antecedents to "Prisoners of Poverty" as well as the series itself. Additionally, it identifies particular personal, professional and social circumstances which may have helped Campbell produce this work.

The Unlikely Beginnings of a Social Critic

Campbell's early life would hardly seem to have prepared her to investigate slum conditions. She was born Helen Campbell Stuart on July 4, 1838, in the upstate New York town of Lockport. Her mother, Jane Campbell Stuart, was descended from

prominent American colonists, as was her father, Homer H. Stuart. A year after Helen's birth, her father apparently left his family and moved to New York City, where he practiced law for half a century and was for several years president of the Continental Bank Company. Helen was educated first in Lockport public schools and then in two private institutions, Gammell School in Rhode Island and Mrs. Cook's Seminary in New Jersey.[9]

Around 1860 she married Grenville Mellen Weeks, then a student at University Medical College (which later became New York University). Weeks graduated in 1861 and became a Navy surgeon, serving on the ironclad USS Monitor among other vessels. President Lincoln rewarded him for bravery in battle with a promotion to major. Following the Civil War, he worked in several different parts of the country, first as medical director of the Florida military district and then as a surgeon and Indian agent in Minnesota and the Dakotas. Campbell is thought to have accompanied him on at least some of these moves. The marriage broke up in 1871 shortly after Weeks returned to civilian life.[10]

Within two years of her marriage, at age 23, Campbell had begun publishing children's stories in juvenile periodicals using her married name of Helen C. Weeks. Between 1868 and 1869 a number of these stories were brought together in a four-volume collection entitled Ainslee Series which sold very well and had a London reprint. In the following years she published additional works for children, several adult novels (under the names "Campbell Wheator." and "Helen Stuart Campbell"), and shorter adult fiction in magazines such as Lippincott's and Harper's. In 1881, after teaching at the Raleigh (N.C.) Cooking School and helping found a mission cooking school and diet kitchen in Washington, D.C., she published a home economics textbook, which was to be widely read. Less than a year later, when best-selling novelist

Albion W. Tournbee began a new high-quality weekly magazine, Our Continent. Campbell was hired as literary and household editor.[11] By the early 1880s, then, she had established a solid literary reputation as well as a steady source of income.

However, by this time she also had begun to produce work quite different from her fiction and housekeeping publications. In the late 1870s she wrote a series of six nonfiction articles for Sunday Afternoon magazine titled "Studies of the Slums." In 1880 another six articles with the same title appeared in Lippincott's, and in 1882 the articles were brought together and expanded into a book, The Problem of the Poor. Very different in both style and content from her earlier work, The Problem of the Poor marked Campbell's beginnings as a journalist, social investigator and social critic.

A New Direction in an "Unknown Country"

Campbell herself called attention to these changes in the first words on the first page of The Problem of the Poor:

> To the most persistent and determined "Radical," there are apt to come moments of perplexity and uncertainty. For many they are more than moments, and the spirit of unrest takes and keeps possession. And so, for myself and others like me, venerable religious "truths," long established social "laws," well known historical and scientific "facts," under the remorseless analysis of our time, had seemed years ago to dissolve before my eyes, leaving in their place only a question.[12]

The "question" that had become so important was how to help the urban poor, "who are literally 'conceived in inequity' and whom the gospel of development scarcely promises to reach." They touched her directly, Campbell said, for they "made my own personal pleasure seem almost a wicked thing if they could not somehow share it."[13]

Campbell believed that neither organized religion nor "radical" politics had successfully helped the poor, and she described how she had become convinced that there was "no solution for these poor wretches." Then, she explained, she came to believe that her despair might be the result of ignorance; she had no direct knowledge of how the poor lived or what help they needed. As a result, she decided to begin her own exploration of the slums—an "unknown country," as she called it, for herself as well as her readers.[14]

Her exploration began with a visit to an evening service at a New York waterfront mission run by a former criminal named Jerry McAuley. There she watched people testify to having been saved from lives as drunkards, prostitutes, gamblers, thieves, and much worse by McAuley's work. McAuley invited her to return, and, she wrote, "I did 'come again,' and again, at last taking my place among the 'regulars,' as the few are called who have stated employment and come constantly."[15] Eight of the remaining 12 chapters in the book describe the experiences which followed.

In these powerful chapters, Campbell used her novelist's skills to create narratives which, except for being true, easily could stand as individual short stories. Characters' physical traits and personalities were vividly described, as were the sights, sounds, odors and especially the dangers of their environments. Some characters presented their stories directly to the reader as monologues. At other times Campbell was very much present, asking questions, describing surroundings and reacting to the stories she was told. And in other chapters the narrative was Campbell's own, recounting her journeys through particular tenements and neighborhoods.

Campbell never pretended to be comfortable in the slums; she clearly was as much a product of her own middle-class environment as her subjects were of their surroundings. As a result, her writing tended toward melodrama and sentiment, retreating to gentility before raw nerves could be exposed. Similarly, her language frequently was stilted and seldom was subtle. Yet this may have had little importance for her middle-class readers, particularly given the empathy it is still possible to feel for her in following her explorations. Readers might easily have been drawn along with her, as when she started out to visit sick slum-dwellers with a woman doctor, who first asked her, "Can you stand foul smells?"

> "I will stand them, for I want to see," I made answer, recalling the constitutional antipathy to them and to disease, which had been one of my stumbling blocks. "I ought to be able to if you can."
>
> "Ah, but I had long training," she said, "and even now, often, I have to go out to the landing two or three times in the course of a call, I grow so faint."[16]

Although always an outsider, Campbell was one who often let her characters speak for themselves while she filled in the physical details. Through this device, vivid pictures could be drawn and, as in a novel, dramatic stories could be told, with Campbell herself serving as the central unifying character. Her presence in the stories also ensured that, as interesting and visual as they were, they were never mere stories. They also served as vehicles for Campbell's own judgments, becoming unambiguous explanations of problems and their causes.

All sections were not written in story form. Some later chapters were essays which proposed specific solutions to the problems described earlier.[17] Here she brought in statistics, data from political reports and current social ideas. Yet even these essays were full of dialogue, narrative, physical descriptions and Campbell's central presence as an observer.

Campbell suggested specific solutions related to housing reform, medical care and improved nutrition. She advocated far better training of tenement women in shopping and cooking, training she labelled "industrial education" and saw as "the only solution to the incompetence and well-nigh helpless inefficiency of the poorer classes."[18] She also stressed that more fortunate people such as her readers—and particularly women readers—should recognize their responsibility for helping the poor. As she put it in one chapter, "Action will come, I believe, but you who sit in quiet homes must lend a hand."[19]

Campbell paid particular attention to what women both inside and outside the slums could do to improve conditions there, and two of the three chapters devoted to solutions to slum problems dealt with work which should be done by women.[20] Similarly, several chapters focused on the problems of individual women.[21] And throughout the work Campbell repeatedly called attention the extremely low wages earned by most slum women, their overwhelming problems in caring for their families and the effects of male alcoholism on women and children.

Slum Life as Fiction

This concern with slum women is an important link betwen The Problem of the Poor and the "Prisoners of Poverty" series. Yet one additional evolutionary step toward the series must be noted. In early 1886 Campbell published a novel, Mrs. Herndon's Income, which originally appeared as a serial in Christian Union magazine.[22] The novel's plot centered on a liberal and wealthy woman who decided to give her "income" away to the poor. In order to determine the most effective way to distribute the money she undertook a personal investigation of the slums, discovering in the process how miserable tenement life was, particularly for the many women making below-subsistence wages.

Both the tenements and their inhabitants were described in realistic detail, as were the shocked reactions of the novel's philanthropist, Mrs. Herndon. Proposed solutions were clearly identified and developed. They included individual generosity and social responsibility, honest operation of slum businesses and housing, support for church missions and improved "industrial education" which would pay particular attention to teaching women household skills.

In effect, Mrs. Herndon's Income was a fictionalized, better developed and less fragmented account of the kinds of situations journalistically described in The Problem of the Poor. Mrs. Herndon, rather than Campbell, was the book's unifying presence. Like Campbell in the earlier book, as time progressed she became increasingly aware of both wretched slum conditions and their possible solutions. The people Mrs. Herndon encountered told their sad stories or proposed remedies to problems much as people did in The Problem of the Poor, but the fictional form made it possible to present fuller characterizations, sharper conflict and expanded drama. At the same time, the novel's language was more subdued and matter-of-fact and the characters and their situations less simplistic than in the earlier work. Clearly, Campbell had become more comfortable with and knowledgeable about slum life in the intervening years.

"Women Wage-Workers and Their Lives"

It was in the "Prisoners of Poverty" series, though, that Campbell found both an effective journalistic voice and a subject matter appropriate to it. In these articles Campbell reached maturity as a writer as well as a social investigator and analyst. Here her stance was no longer that of an outsider "exploring" the slums;

rather, she was a writer who identified with and understood the women she described. Her tone remained emotional, but the emotionalism was controlled and more effective, grounded as it was in the double tragedies of poignant individual stories and hard economic facts. Similarly, the solutions proposed were at once more radical and more fully argued than in her previous treatments of slum life.

Campbell's articles--which ran under the headline "Prisoners of Poverty" and the subhead "Women Wage-Workers and Their Lives"--appeared in the Tribune every Sunday from October 24, 1886, through March 13, 1887. The Tribune provided commentaries to all installments on separate pages. In addition to drawing attention to each "Prisoners of Poverty" article, the commentaries reiterated specific points made by Campbell and discussed reader reaction to them. They also sometimes provided editorial views very different from Campbell's.

Campbell's first article offered a "general outline" describing women workers in New York's garment industry, where much of the sewing was done at home on a piece-work basis. The article included descriptions of the range of businesses involved, where workers came from, what they did and the working conditions and wages they tolerated. Statistics, financial data, specific demographic details and precise manufacturing information were used to draw this picture.[23]

The Tribune's commentary provided an overview of the article, explaining that it "affords a glimpse into the kind of life scarcely conceivable by the prosperous." Its purpose, the paper said, was to help the reader understand "the restlessness and discontent which prevail among the poor of modern cities, and which proceed too often from a real misery, escape from which has hitherto seemed hopeless to the victims."[24]

Campbell's second article was very different. Here she was very much the novelist, using dialogue, vivid detail and intense drama to tell the story of Rose Haggerty, who earned so little for such exhausting piecework labor that she turned to prostitution in order to support her younger brothers and sisters. The article ended with Rose's words: "But let God Almighty judge who's to blame most--I that was driven or them that drove me to the pass I'm in."[25]

The Tribune's commentary noted that this situation was hardly "rare and exceptional," but rather an example of the "peril and suffering which are the better lot of whole classes." And it elaborated on Rose's final point: "Society, arraigned more and more seriously and menacingly for its apathy, heartlessness and self-absorption, has hitherto adjudged the blame, with perverse obstinacy, to the victims of its own mismanagement."[26]

Articles in the following weeks combined the kind of hard data present in the first week's piece with the narrative and drama of the second. They dealt with such topics as the economics of the garment trade--particularly how low wages made it possible to sell clothing at very low prices[27]--the kinds of immoral tactics used to keep wages low,[28] and how the underwear and jacket trades operated.[29]

These articles were full of precise economic data on workers' meager earnings and how they managed to survive on them, the size of different manufacturers' profits and how much consumers paid for goods. Yet they also contained many individual stories of grueling work, extreme poverty, sickness and despair. Campbell often let the women themselves describe their problems with what today is known as sexual harassment,[30] with hazardous working conditions,[31] and with

dishonest employers.[32] Thus, readers came to know and understand victims such as Lotte Bauer, who died over her sewing machine,[33] and "Catherine E____," who supported her children and disabled husband on $25 a month.[34] Similarly, they met victimizers such as the dressmaker "Madame" who found ingenious ways to avoid paying her "sewing girls,"[35] and the "business manager" who briskly explained to Campbell that no profits actually were made in clothing manufacturing.[36]

During these weeks the Tribune commentaries reiterated two points stressed by Campbell. First was that an important purpose of the "Prisoners of Poverty" series was to present information which would cause readers to act, since "clear knowledge of the actual situation is indispensable to effective improvement."[37] Second was that the intense competition of the clothing business was a key reason that wages were so low, hours so long, working conditions so despicable and employers so mercenary.[38] Later, though, Campbell was to carry both points further than the paper would have liked.

At the end of December, Campbell began to expand the scope of her articles. She continued to describe the miserable lives and work of different kinds of garment workers, but she began to write more and more about the tenements in which they and so many other poor people lived.[39] Shortly afterwards, she enlarged the series still further by describing work done by women in fields other than the garment trade, particularly those employed as servants,[40] shopgirls [41] and in the so-called "steady trades."[42] These articles, too, were dominated by individual stories, often told in the words of the women themselves. And, again, these tales were accompanied by precise data on such things as the costs of manufacturing and the budgets of tenement dwellers. But now the scope of the series had been broadened and the cast of characters widened.

Campbell's Analysis of Working Women's Problems and Their Solutions

The series grew in an even more important way when Campbell began to deal with the complex causes of slum women's problems and the difficulties in solving them. Eventually she admitted that simply describing these problems to readers was not enough to provoke action. Indeed, in late January she warned,

> There comes even a certain impatient distrust of those who persist in unsavory researches and even more unsavory details in the results. If there is not distrust, if the easy-going kindness that is a portion of the American temperament is stirred, it is but for the moment, and when the hand that sought the pocket or the check-book instinctively has presented its gift, interest is over.[43]

Campbell thus began to do more than inform readers about injustices --which the Tribune commentaries so often stressed as the series' goal.[44] She proceeded to an analysis of the social and economic factors which she believed to be at the root of these problems.

Her analysis began with an attack on the country's competitive base, first in two November articles [45] and then more completely in articles appearing in January and February.[46] This analysis was consistent with the Tribune's discussion of the evils of competition in its commentaries.[47] At the same time, she proposed cooperation--between manufacturers, between workers, and between manufacturers and workers--as a solution to the exploitation caused by competition. Frequently workers were asked why they did not join together to buy supplies, obtain higher wages and share shopping and cooking tasks,[48] just as their employers were asked why they did not unite to keep the prices of manufactured goods high enough to pay workers fair wages.[49]

However, the responses to questions about cooperation were overwhelmingly negative; she consistently was told that under present circumstances working together was impossible. Two especially sad articles published in early 1887 made this point. In both, employers described failed attempts at improving working conditions, increasing wages, instigating profit-sharing and uniting with other manufacturers to promote fair employment. Both articles blamed worker ignorance for that failure, pointing out that employees with no knowledge of or experience in controlling their lives could not take advantage of--let alone demand--reforms in work or housing.[50]

This conclusion led Campbell back to a theme first begun in The Problem of the Poor: that ignorance was a central cause of poverty. Again, she thought the remedy lay in "industrial education," but she developed her descriptions of how this education would work and what its benefits would be more fully than in her earlier work. She explained that industrial education was still a means of teaching workers the skills which would lead to better jobs and more healthful lives; however, it also would go beyond instruction in skills to teach an appreciation of "beauty and order and law"—and eventually "love of the work itself."[51]
In short, industrial education could change the slums. Its most important benefit, Campbell said, "begins in the kindergarten, from which the poorest child takes home, even to the tenement-house, something strong enough, when growth has come, to abolish the tenement-house forever." For this reason, industrial education should be the "birthright" of "every child born on American soil."[52]

Campbell also made it clear that the poor were not the only ones who needed further instruction; the middle and upper classes, too, had much to learn. But their

education could not stop with learning about the poor's misery. They also must learn to recognize their own complicity in this situation and then commit themselves to action. The series was full of reminders—like Rose Haggerty's—that these hard-working and hard-suffering women were the victims of those who profited from the labor. To Campbell, the Tribune's women readers had particular responsibility here, for these women enjoyed (and paid little for) the labors of servants, attentive shop girls and particularly garment workers. Campbell was especially explicit about the "real" costs of manufactured clothing.

> As one woman selects, well pleased, garment after garment, daintily tucked and trimmed and finished beyond any capacity of ordinary home sewing, marvelling a little that a few dollars can give such lavish return, there arises, from narrow attic and dark, foul basement, the cry of the women whose lifeblood is in these garments.[53]

Toward the end of the series she detailed women's responsibilities as employers of domestic help. Two articles were devoted to the hazards, humiliations and meager pay which almost inevitably were the lot of servants,[54] and at the end, Campbell proposed a kind of contract which would promise fair treatment of and respect for these employees. This "schedule," she said, should be "printed, framed and hung in every kitchen in the land."[55]

The Tribune's commentary to this article on March 6, 1887, took Campbell to task for her naivete. It called most of her ideas "quite impractical under almost all circumstances" and complained that she had examined her subject only from "the point of view of the ideal servant." The problem was "so deep-seated," the commentary said, that "no set of rules can be usefully applied."[56]

This was not the first time the Tribune had disagreed with Campbell's views on what it called "household service." In December, the paper had suggested that one solution to the misery of garment workers' lives was for these women to prepare themselves for "the comfortable and well-paid career offered by domestic service."[57] It also carried two letters--one from suffragist Lucy Stone--strongly recommending domestic service for the women described in Campbell's articles.[58] Campbell had answered these suggestions with disturbing accounts of servants' problems, including the story of a 15-year-old who was raped by a man living in the house in which she worked, then dismissed by her mistress because "such things don't hapen unless the girl is to blame."[59]

By early January the Tribune appeared reconciled to Campbell's position on this issue, for it carried a letter from a woman servant who described many years of suffering and concluded, "I do not believe any slave toiled harder than I did." Like Campbell, the letter-writer said that change would only come when women employers recognized their responsibility: "This is a case the churches cannot reach unless woman, through the pulpit, can be made to feel that she is her sister's keeper."[60] Yet by March the disagreement had resumed and Campbell's ideas were labelled impractical.

The Tribune was no more satisfied with a broader proposition for aiding the poor which Campbell suggested in her final article. She criticized America's social and political systems for not only permitting but encouraging exploitation and shallow values. All citizens were damaged by this situation, and "even for the most

unselfish of us there is an exaggerated estimate of the value of money." This problem had become so deeply ingrained, she believed, that a radical change was required:

> Thus far we have left the bettering of social conditions to the individual, and any hint of state interference comes with it the approbrium of socialism. Yet more and more for those who are unterrified of names, the best in socialism offers itself as the sole way of escape from the monopolies and stupidities of the present system.[6]

The Tribune, reacted strongly to her suggestion that a remedy might be found in"the best of socialism":

> She is not . . . well-advised when she admits a hint of that dislike of the results of skill and industry in the form of wealth, which is the most unreasonable and anomalous position for anyone to take in a country where opportunity is as free as the resources are manifold.[62]

Similarly, Campbell's other solutions were summarized and then dismissed: "It is in no way a disparagement of the reporter's ability to say that she has been more successful in describing the actual conditions which call for reform than in proposing remedies."[63]

That Campbell became increasingly analytical over the 22 weeks of the series--and the Tribune increasingly objected to the content of that analysis--attests to her further growth as a reformer. This growth is even more distinct when the contents of "Prisoners of Poverty" are compared to those of the earlier and much more tentative Problem of the Poor. Clearly, during the 1880s, Campbell herself changed. She developed a real understanding of poverty and slum life, also focusing on a particular aspect of it--its women workers--which needed exposure and which she was emotionally and practically prepared to report.

Yet Campbell's growth cannot be fully described from evidence within her journalism alone. The question of how and why this work was created also is important, and answering it requires an examination of her personal, social and intellectual environment. Although many of the details of her life during this period still are unknown, enough can be pieced together to hypothesize about some of her motivations and influences.

An Environment for Change

Part of the significance of Campbell's work lies in the time at which it was written. Her writings preceded the turn-of-the-century Progressive movement which shared her concerns with tenement reform and ending the economic exploitation of the lower classes. Similarly, her work preceded the muckraking journalism which was so important to progressivism and used, as did Campbell, shocking information and systematic study to arouse the middle-class conscience.[65] However, other journalistic and social developments may have been important to Campbell.

Her choice of subject, for example, may have beeen influenced by the fact that slum life and the problems of poor women had received sporadic previous attention from American writers. Some mid-19th-Century reformers and feminists were practicularly concerned with the plight of poor working women, and after the Civil War detailed studies were conducted of their living and working conditions. They also were the subjects of novels.[65]

Similarly, charitable organizations, members of the clergy, social workers, governmental organizations and other agencies had called for tenement reform since before the Civil War, with several studies offering data on different aspects of the slum problem.[66] Beginning in the 1840s, tenement life--particularly when presented

in a sensational or romanticized manner--became an increasingly popular background for drama and fiction.[67] Nonfiction book, newspaper and magazine treatments also appeared, often based on personal observation. Like the fiction and drama, many of these accounts were sensational or romanticized, playing to the public interest in urban crime and "sin."[68] Not until the late 1880s and early 1890s, though, did slum conditions become a popular journalistic topic.[69]

It also should be noted that women had been important in American reform movements at least since the 1830s, writing and speaking about social problems as well as confronting them more directly as workers.[70] Indeed, Campbell was in many ways typical of late-19th-Century "domestic reformers"--middle class women who attempted to aid working-class women by studying their problems first-hand, often publicizing them in writings.[71]

One of the first fiction writers to deal realistically with the misery of lower-class life and work was Rebecca Harding Davis, who published her "Life in the Iron Mills" in 1861.[72] Eight years later Davis was hired to write articles and editorials for the New York Tribune,[73] a newspaper which under Horace Greeley had strongly supported women's rights.[74] Greeley had been in part motivated by a desire to attract women readers when in 1844 he hired Margaret Fuller to write about social issues. Fuller paid particular attention to issues related to women and the problems of the lower classes. A number of important women wrote for the Tribune after Fuller, and a guiding force behind the Sunday edition--in which Campbell's series appeared--was a woman, Ellen Mackay Hutchinson.[75]

Thus, Campbell wrote "Prisoners of Poverty" for a newspaper which had hired numerous women and devoted space to their problems. Additionally, by Campbell's time

women had been accepted and recognized for their reform work. And the topic of slum problems had received previous attention in 19th-Century print media. All of these broad trends may have influenced Campbell.

Yet it's also likely that circumstances of her personal life led her to take up the cause of poor working women. That her father lived at home only briefly and her marriage lasted little more than ten years (including considerable time during which her husband was absent), may have been important in determining her later journalistic focus on the problems of women supporting themselves and their families. Her marriage may have influenced her work in an additional way, for by living with her husband in different parts of the country she increased her own exposure to other ways of life.[76]

Although divorce and separation held a social stigma for women of Campbell's day, both were on the increase. A revealing source on this subject is Woman's Who's Who of America, 1914-1915, which contains entries on over 9,000 prominent women, including many active in Progressive reforms. (Campbell is one of the women included.) One study of these entries has shown relatively high divorce and separation rates for this population. Over four percent were permanently separated and 18 percent were divorced—compared with a divorce rate of 6 to 8 percent for the general population. Of all professions, women working in the arts had the highest divorce and separation rates—22.4 percent and four percent, respectively.[77] (Campbell's entry refers to her as an "author" and "social reformer,"[78] so this study would classify her as working in the arts.) Over 50 percent of women in the arts were, like Campbell, writers,[79] and it's apparent that women in this field could succeed without a husband.

Yet Campbell probably was fortunate to be married during the years she was beginning her career as a fiction writer. This was a time in which middle-class women were increasingly permitted to work for pay, and writing was a particularly "respected" career for them.[80] It can be assumed that Campbell's husband supported her financially during most of the ten years of their marriage, and by the time she separated from him in 1871 she was a well-established author of children's stories, even having published a best-seller. She must have belt capable of supporting herself with her writing.

Seven years later she took advantage of her mobility as a husbandless and childless woman to develop her interests in another field, moving to North Carolina where she added to her income teaching at the Raleigh Cooking School. She also began work on a homemaking book which marked the start of her activism in the growing home economics movement. This broad and diffuse movement worked to improve the productivity and social benefits of many aspects of homemaking,[81] and Campbell later called it "the connecting link between the physical economics of the individual and the social economics of the state."[82] She maintained that "the low grade industrial state" of household work kept women "in a condition of arrested development and suppressed specialization industrially, which means a similar condition mentally."[83]

In her home economics writing, which continued for many years, Campbell was particularly concerned with developments which would aid poor women, including improved techniques of low-budget financial planning, food preparation, hygiene and health care.[84] These concerns may have developed as a result of her 1880 work helping establish a mission cooking school and diet kitchen in Washington, D.C.

In the decade following the dissolution of her marriage, then, a kind of logical progression towards production of The Problem of the Poor can be traced. Campbell came to increasingly focus on the concerns of women, including poor women, and many of the solutions to "the problem" proposed in that work can be tied to aspects of home economics. The progression from this work to "Prisoners of Poverty" is even clearer, as was shown earlier in this paper.

Yet both progressions may well have been accelerated by Campbell's involvement in one additional development--the American women's club movement. This movement took fire in 1868 with the founding of the New England Woman's Club in Boston and Sorosis in New York City. Sorosis was begun by Jane Cunningham Croly, a widely-syndicated journalist who wrote under the pen name of "Jennie June." After women journalists were barred from a New York Press Club dinner for Charles Dickens, Croly became convinced that all professional women needed an organization which would help them be taken--and take themselves--more seriously. Sorosis' goal was to help women gain both confidence and respect through meetings at which they would develop their intellectual capacities and share common experiences.[85]

Helen Campbell was an early member of the New York club, as were many other women journalists and writers. It also attracted artists, teachers, physicians, ministers, scientists, actresses, lecturers, lawyers and businesswomen. Numerous members had worked for reforms such as abolition, utopianism and women's rights, while many were self-supporting and most were well-educated. All felt a need to improve themselves through the study of culture and the examination of developments affecting women in fields such as government, education, medicine and economics.[86]

It is not difficult to imagine the importance of Sorosis membership to Campbell. The club would have offered her the support of other women as she made difficult decisions, such as whether to separate from her husband, join a Washington mission and begin a serious journalistic investigation of slum conditions.[87] Additionally, Sorosis may have served as a kind of "network" to other independent women, including writers and professionals in other fields where important social, political and scientific developments were taking place. Club membership may even have helped her recognize the significance of working women as a journalistic subject. In any case, she was fortunate to be faced with opportunities for personal and professional growth at a time and place where women had joined together in efforts at self-improvement.

A Final Evaluation

The precise effects of Campbell's writing are impossible to determine, but scattered references to her work make it possible to draw some conclusions. Broadly, her descriptions of the poor's misery--and particularly the problems of women--have been described as having "considerable impact in her day."[88] They are credited with bringing a new understanding of tenement life to middle-class Americans.[89] The Tribune series reached this audience especially well, for the Sunday edition at this time had a circulation of between 50,000 and 75,000, appealing primarily to educated and cultured readers.[90] The paper was an important source of "popular" information on urban problems in the late 19th Century.[91]

Two of Campbell's contemporaries wrote that her "Prisoners" series "caused a profound and widespread sensation respecting the life of the wage-women in the metropolis." They called this work "The seed from which has issued a vast amount of literature on the topic."[92] On a less dramatic and more immediate level, the Tribune

carried a letter six weeks after the series began which stated that one effect of Campbell's "graphic picture of the suffering of poor sewing women" was that "already charitable people are offering aid."[93]

Campbell's work also was important to specific social developments. It was, for example, used in later arguments advocating a licensing system which would regulate garment industry piece-work done in tenements.[94] And it has been cited as an impetus for the formation of the consumers' leagues begun in the 1890s. The leagues gathered and published data on the conditions under which different kinds of clothing were produced, distrbuting "white lists" which recommended patronage only of manufacturers who were fair employers. They also worked for improved legislation to protect women and children factory workers.[95]

Ironically, though, one of the most useful frameworks for evaluating Campbell's journalism is found not in an historical assessment but in a novel written by muckraking journalist David Graham Phillips. In Phillips' A Woman Ventures, published in 1902, a newspaper editor gave this advice to a woman reporter:

> Send us what you see—what you really see. If you see misery, send it. If not, for heaven's sake, don't "fake" it . . . . Go to the workmen's houses. Look all through them—parlours, bedrooms, kitchens. Look at the grocer's bills and the butcher's. Tell what their clothes cost. Describe their children. Talk to their children. Make us see just what kind of people these are that are making such a stir. You've a great opportunity. Don't miss it. And don't, don't, do "fine writing." No "literature"—just life—men, women, children.[96]

Whatever her influences and motivations, and whatever the effects of her work, some 20 years earlier Helen Campbell saw her own "great opportunity" and did not miss it.

NOTES

[1]"The Prisoners of Poverty," New York Tribune, October 17, 1886, p. 4 (hereafter cited as NYT).

[2]Ibid.

[3]Helen Campbell, The Problem of the Poor (New York: Fords, Howard & Hulbert,1882).

[4]Helen Campbell, Mrs. Herndon's Income (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1886).

[5]"The Prisoners of Poverty," NYT, October 17, 1886, p. 4.

[6]For a good discussion of the beginnings of muckraking, see C. C. Regier, The Era of the Muckrakers (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1957), pp. 43-58.

[7] Social histories which utilize Campbell's works to a significant extent include the following: Dolores Hayden, The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods and Cities (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981); David M. Katzman, Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Susan Estabrook Kennedy, If all We Did Was Weep at Home: A History of White Working-class Women in America (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979); Arthur Meier Schlesinger, The Rise of the City, 1878-1898 (New York: Macmillan, 1933); Barbara Mayer Wertheimer, We Were There: The Story of Working Women in America (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

[8]An excellent essay describing the importance of reissues of works such as and including those by Helen Campbell is Alice Kessler-Harris, "Women's Wage Work as Myth and History," Labor History 19 (Spring 1978): 287-307.

[9]Edward T James, Janet Wilson James and Paul S. Boyer, eds., Notable American Women, 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 280; The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography, vol. 9 (New York: James T. White & Co., 1907), p. 126; Frances E. Willard and Mary A. Livermore, eds., A Woman of the Century, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Wells Moulton, 1893), pp. 147-48; John William Leonard, ed., Woman's Who's Who in America 1914-1915 (New York: American Commonwealth Company, 1914), p. 157. The first three works all state that Campbell's father moved to New York City when she was about a year old, but they do not explicitly state that he moved without his family. They also state that Campbell was educated in "New York" public schools--not explaining whether the reference is to New York State of New York City schools. However, Leonard identifies these schools as being in Lockport. Thus, it can be surmised that Campbell's father did indeed leave his family when he moved to New York.

[10]James et al., p. 280; Willard and Livermore, p. 148; Who Was Who in America, vol. 1 (Chicago: A. N. Marquis co., 1943), p. 1316.

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[11]James et al., p. 280; Willard and Livermore, p. 148; Frank Luther Mott, A History of American Magazines, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), pp. 557-78; Mary A. Hill, Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Making of a Radical Feminist, 1860-1896, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), p. 239.

[12]Campbell, Problem, p. 8.

[13]Ibid., p. 9.

[14]Ibid, pp. 9-10.

[15]Ibid., p. 22.

[16]Ibid., p. 68.

[17]Four chapters deal with specific ways to help the needy: "The Tenement House Question," pp. 125-25; "Diet and Its Doings," pp. 214-29; "One Woman's Work," pp. 230-44; "Behind the Bars," pp. 192-213. "Behind the Bars," though, addresses insane asylum reform, so it is not conceptually tied to the rest of the book or the subject of slum conditions in general. But it does share the other chapters' mixture of personal anecdotes and scholarly research.

[18]Ibid., p. 244.

[19]Campbell, Problem, pp. 124-25.

[20]Ibid., chpts. 23 and 13.

[21]Ibid., chpts. 4, 8 and 10.

[22]James et al., p. 280.

[23]Helen Campbell, "Prisoners of Poverty," NYT, October 24, 1886, p. 13 (hereafter cited as "Prisoners").

[24]"The News This Morning," NYT, October 24, 1886, p. 4

[25]"Prisoners," NYT, October 31, 1886, p. 4

[26]"The News This Morning," NYT, October 31, 1886, p. 4

[27]"Prisoners," NYT, November 7, 1886, p. 13

[28]"Prisoners," NYT, November 14, 1886, p. 13 and November 28, 1886, p. 13.

[29]"Prisoners," NYT, December 5, 1886, p. 13, December 19, 1886, p. 13 and January 9, 1887, p. 10.

[30]"Prisoners," NYT, December 5, 1886, p. 13, December 23, 1886, p. 13 and January 2, 1887, p. 10.

[31]"Prisoners," NYT, January 9, 1887, p. 10

[32]"Prisoners," NYT, November 21, 1886, p. 13 and November 28, 1886, p. 13.

[33]"Prisoners," NYT, December 12, 1886, p. 13.

[34]"Prisoners," NYT, December 5, 1886, p. 13.

[35]"Prisoners," NYT, November 21, 1886, p. 13.

[36]"Prisoners," NYT, November 28, 1886, p. 13.

[37]"The News This Morning," NYT, November 14, 1886, p. 4; see also "The News This Morning," October 24, 1886, p. 4, "The News This Morning," October 31, 1886, p. 4 and "The Responsibility," January 30, 1887, p. 4.

[38]"The News This Morning," NYT, November 14, 1886, p. 4, "The News This Morning," NYT, November 21, 1886, p. 4 and "The Chains of the Poor," NYT, December 12, 1886, p. 4.

[39]"Prisoners," NYT, December 26, 1886, p. 2 and January 2, 1887, p. 10.

[40]"Prisoners," NYT, January 12, 1887, p. 10, February 27, 1887, p. 10 and March 6, 1887, p. 10.

[41]"Prisoners," NYT, January 30, 1887, p. 10

[42]"Prisoners," NYT, February 20, 1887, p. 10

[43]"Prisoners," NYT, January 23, 1887, p. 10

[44]See Footnote 39 above.

[45]"Prisoners," NYT, November 7, 1886, p. 13 and November 28, 1886, p. 13.

[46]"Prisoners," NYT, January 30, 1887, p. 10 and February 13, 1887, p. 9.

[47]See Footnote 40 above.

[48]"Prisoners," NYT, December 26, 1886, p. 2, January 30, 1887, p. 10 November 28, 1886, p. 13 and November 7, 1886, p. 13.

[49]"Prisoners," NYT, November 14, 1886, p. 13 and November 28, 1886.

[50]"Prisoners," January 16, 1887, p. 10 and February 6, 1887, p. 10.

[51]"Prisoners," NYT, March 13, 1887, p. 10.

[52]Ibid.

[53]"Prisoners," NYT, November 7, 1886, p. 13.

[54]"Prisoners," NYT, February 27, 1887, p. 10 and March 6, 1887, p. 10.

55"Prisoners," NYT, March 6, 1887, p. 10.

56"Household Work," NYT, March 6, 1887, p. 4.

57"The Chains of the Poor," NYT, December 12, 1886, p. 4.

58"Lucy Stone's Remedy," NYT, December 5, 1886, p. 13 and "Seamstress and Servant," NYT, December 19, 1886, p. 13.

59"Prisoners," NYT, January 1, 1887, p. 10.

60"The Other Side of The Question," NYT, January 2, 1887, p. 10.

61"Prisoners," NYT, March 13, 1887, p. 10.

62"Conclusion of 'Prisoners of Poverty'," NYT, March 13, 1887, p. 4.

63Ibid.

64Louis Filler, Appointment at Armageddon: Muckraking and Progressivism in American Life (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976), pp. 330-49, 393-430; Louis Filler, The Muckrakers. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), pp. 110-26. Robert H. Bremner, From the Depths: The Discovery of Poverty in the Unites States (New York: New York University Press, 1964), p. 75; Walter Fuller Taylor, The Economic Novel in America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1942; reprint ed., New York: Octagon Books, 1964), pp. 79-80.

65Bremner, pp. 76-76 and Taylor, pp. 29-33, 79-83.

66Bremner, pp. 3-85 and Roy Lubove, The Progressives and the Slums (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962; reprint ed., Westport Conn: Greenwood Press, 1974), pp. 4-23.

67Taylor, p. 79 and Bremner, pp. 86-102.

68Taylor, p. 41, Bremner, pp. 67-70 and Mott, p. 313.

69Taylor, pp. 79-80.

70Filler, Appointment. pp. 17-20; Annie Nathan Meyer, Woman's Work in America (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1891; reprint ed., New York: Arno Press, 1972), pp. 323-45; Eleanor Flexner, Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States (New York: Atheneum, 1971), pp. 203-09: Gerda Lerner, The Woman in American History (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1971), pp. 71-79.

71Kennedy, pp. 132-36.

72Taylor, p. 79 and Bremner, p. 94.

73Fairfax Downey, Richard Harding Davis: His Day (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1933), p. 307.

74Harry W. Baehr, Jr., The New York Tribune Since the Civil War (New York: Dodd, Meade and Company, 1936; reprint ed., New York: Octagon Books, 1972), p. 18.

[75]Marion Marzolf, Up From the Footnote: A History of Women Journalists (New York: Hastings House, 1977), pp. 13-22; Ishbel Ross, Ladies of the Press (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1936), pp. 402-03; Filler, Appointment, p. 38; Baehr, p. 142.

[76]This point is explicitly made in only one source on Campbell, Willard and Livermore's A Woman of the Century, p. 148: "Married at the age of twenty to any army surgeon, she thereafter lived in various portions of the United States, during which time she gained that broad experience which has reappeared in her literary work." Because this source was published when Campbell was still alive it has considerable credibility.

[77]Barbara Kuhn Campbell, The "Liberated" Woman of 1914: Prominent Women in the Progressive Era (n.p.: UMI Research Press, 1979), pp. xi-xvi, 48, 93-94.

[78]Leonard, p. 157.

[79]Barbara Kuhn Campbell, p. 60.

[80]Ibid., pp. 47, 60-61 and Karen J. Blair, The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868-1914 (New York: Holmes & Meier, Publishers, 1980), p. 11.

[81]Julie A. Mathaei, An Economic History of Women in America (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), pp. 157-86.

[82]Helen Campbell, Household Economics (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1896), p. 2.

[83]Ibid., p. 141.

[84]Hill, p. 239.

[85]Blair, pp. 15-20.

[86]Ibid., pp. 22-31.

[87]Blair, p. 30, credits Sorosis with giving many women "strength for still more" change in their lives. She specifically cites some of Campbell's actions in the 1870s and 1880s as evidence for this claim. Similarly, Barbara Kuhn Campbell, p. 181, concludes that "supportive female societies may have been instrumental in sustaining women who had to overcome domestic difficulties to pursue their interests."

[88]James et al., p. 281.

[89]Kennedy, p. 135 and Elizabeth Faulkner Baker, Protective Labor Legislation, with Special Reference to Women in the State of New York (New York: Columbia University Press, 1925; reprint ed., New York: AMS Press, 1965), p. 246.

[90]Baehr, pp. 142-43.

[91]Bremner, pp. 67-68.

[92]Willard and Livermore, p. 148.

[93]"Lucy Stone's Remedy," NYT, December 5, 1886, p. 13.

[94]Baker, pp. 245-46.

[95]Bremner, p. 76.

[96]David Graham Phillips, A Woman Ventures (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1902), p. 87.